

Forging a Comprehensive Approach to Counterinsurgency Operations

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The United States will face a myriad of new strategic challenges and opportunities in the 21st century that will test its capability and capacity to succeed in an increasingly competitive, dynamic, and uncertain operating environment. A key component to success in future stability operations will be the ability to interpret the seemingly chaotic series of weak global signals and environmental stimuli to draw logically valid connections and conclusions to recognize obstacles and opportunities in advance. Equally important will be the capability, capacity, and will to leverage the appropriate balance of national power in a coordinated, synchronized, and focused manner to mitigate risk and exploit opportunities.

While resourcing will continue to be an important component in this equation, the onus is on the U.S. Government to set the conditions now to shape success in the future. The single most important prerequisite for the assured success of future stability operations will be the ability to foster the conditions required to achieve a comprehensive whole-of-government approach that is forged from unity of effort and purpose across the depth and breadth of the government.

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This will require a cultural shift among key governmental stakeholders to foster an environment where mutually vested cooperation and coordination are the standard, rather than the exception.

Context

To offer legitimate and lasting solutions to this challenge, we must first examine the context and fabric of the current environment to frame the issues. As the United States enters the second decade of the 21st century, it faces an uncertain future that will be strongly influenced by the nature of tomorrow's global operating environment. America's strategic security posture will be impacted by the emergence of several significant global trends, whose collective impact will further test America's capability, capacity, and will to conduct stability operations in support of fragile states. A central component of American foreign policy will focus on building partner capacity with vulnerable governments whose failure would represent a significant strategic risk for the Nation. The way to achieve this strategic goal of building partner capacity will be through the application of comprehensive stability operations.

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The next decade will likely be defined by persistent conflict, fueled in part by the emergence of several global trends.¹ These global trends will be sources of instability and "drivers of conflict."²

Globalization has served to reduce the traditional barriers, boundaries, and borders that have historically isolated nation-states from events and crises in other parts of the world. Events and phenomena that have historically been contained at the national level, such as natural disasters and regime change, now have the potential to collapse the walls of isolation and manifest themselves with global effect. Economic trends such as free trade agreements (for example, the North American Free Trade Agreement), economic unions among nations (such as the European Union), and increased outsourcing of jobs from developed to developing countries have facilitated increased economic interdependence among nations and the distribution of wealth from developed economies to the rest of the world.³ Ominously, this redistribution of wealth has not been equitably applied, further widening and polarizing the gulf that separates the economically privileged from the deprived of the world. Those disenfranchised by this process will be susceptible to indoctrination of extremist thought and ideology as they seek a viable alternative to their plight.

Increased globalization has ushered in an age distinguished by the rapid transfer of information, ideas, and technologies that have further enabled global innovation and prosperity. The Internet, cellular communications, and digital technologies have made information readily available to those with the means to access it. The information revolution has empowered individuals across the globe, offering on-demand access to a plethora of source materials via the Internet and readily available consumer technologies that are comparable to, or in some cases better than, those of the state.⁴

Information today knows no geographical boundaries. A nation-state's ability to control



and/or restrict the flow of information has seriously waned, replaced by individuals and groups intent on exporting terror across the globe. Indeed, America's adversaries have successfully exploited these informational and technological advancements to further their extremist ideology and operations, and will do so increasingly in the future.⁵ While these advances have had many beneficial effects globally, they have also had the converse effect of empowering individuals and groups intent on inflicting harm to the state and its people.

The world's growing population, coupled with a rapid urbanization in developing nations, will stress government capacities to provide essential services to populations, particularly in developing nations where expanding reproduction rates are projected to increase developing populations from 5.6 billion in 2009 to 7.9 billion by 2050.⁶ The fragile and burgeoning governments of the developing world will be most susceptible to the destabilizing effects of unchecked population growth due to their immature and/or dilapidated infrastructures. Compounding this issue will be an increased demand for ever-dwindling natural resources, exacerbated by the growing middle-class demands of China and India,⁷ which will increase competition and tensions among developed nations. The converse effect of these trends is that developing nations will increasingly struggle to secure the natural resources required to meet their populations' basic needs—potentially setting the stage for a Malthusian crisis.⁸ Episodic events such as natural disasters and pandemics will continue to have the potential to aggravate the destabilizing effects of overpopulation by further heightening the demands placed on governments, and in some

extreme cases may serve to be the proverbial “straw that breaks the camel’s back.”

Changing Character of Conflict

As the world rapidly evolves, so too will the character of conflict. Future conflicts will vary in size and scope across the entire spectrum of conflict.⁹ Combat will likely be waged by a diverse combination of state and non-state actors. America’s adversaries will pursue a dynamic combination of means, shifting their employment in rapid and surprising ways. Future adversaries will likely use a tailor-made mix of sophisticated conventional and unconventional tactics and weaponry to mitigate our advantages and accentuate their own strengths.

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Hybrid threats, epitomized by Hizballah against Israel in southern Lebanon in 2006, will increasingly challenge state actors’ ability to maintain security domestically and peace internationally.¹⁰ These hybrid nonstate actors will possess many of the same trappings as a nation-state, such as sophisticated weaponry and tactics, yet will not be handicapped by bureaucracies or restricted by geographical boundaries. They will be distinguished by their organizational flexibility, agility, and adaptability. These nonstate actors with direct or indirect state support, often operating in friendly or neutral nations, will asymmetrically employ a dynamic combination of conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal capabilities against the United States and its

allies designed specifically to counter and neutralize our advantages.

Future conflict will increasingly be waged among the people rather than around them. Potential adversaries have taken note of America’s experience in counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, learning how irregular forces can successfully counter a larger and more powerful military force. These conflicts have shown that an insurgency can survive, despite constant military pressure, by drawing closer to a supportive and/or passive populace to conduct operations designed to attrite national will and counter efforts aimed at legitimacy.¹¹ As America’s success in Iraq has demonstrated, an insurgency can only survive as long as it maintains legitimacy among, and thus the support of, the indigenous population. The loss of an insurgency’s legitimacy will lead to its eventual defeat. Therefore, gaining and maintaining legitimacy of the host nation government and the marginalization of insurgent groups will continue to be the primary goal of counterinsurgency operations. U.S. Government ability to field people with the appropriate balance of skills and vision to bridge the cultural divide and strike a mutually beneficial relationship with our indigenous partners will be a vital component of future success.

Understanding the Operating Environment

As the Multi-National Division–North commander in Iraq from 2008–2009, I had the opportunity to put theory into practice. The first step for a successful counterinsurgency strategy is to develop a clear understanding and appreciation of the indigenous environment, all the while realizing that stability operations must be consistent with

the historical and cultural norms of the country in which our efforts reside. The web of a society is made up of numerous historic, religious, tribal, political, and economic threads, which, taken collectively, constitute the fabric of a culture. Much like the fabric of a sweater, each thread is interwoven and interdependent on the others to form the whole. Pulling on an individual thread within a sweater has an effect on the others and adversely affects the entire object. Such is the case with the interdependent threads of the cultural fabric of a society. Consequently, we must be able to invest the intellectual rigor and restraint necessary to avoid potentially adverse second- and third-order effects of American action and inaction.

What confronts our people on the ground is the most complicated battlefield in the history of warfare—an asymmetrical “three-block war.” On one block, we may be engaged in a vicious fight; on the next block, we may be building a school; and on the third block, we may be restoring water and power—with all of this being done simultaneously. Each and every day, U.S. personnel will make life-or-death decisions within the blink of an eye—to process, decide, and take action. It is within this complex, uncertain, and unrelenting operating environment that the most junior people will be making decisions and holding responsibilities normally associated with more senior leaders. They must be reliant on their wits, values, and cultural understanding to succeed in this environment.

The most pressing obstacle hindering our cultural understanding is an arrogant and haughty attitude. It is critically important to understand the fabric of the society that we are working in to cultivate and develop relationships with indigenous partners; relationships

must be built on a foundation of mutual trust and respect and then sustained. These trust- and value-based relationships are only realized after hours and hours of shared hardships, dialogue, and understanding. In forging these types of relationships, we must be aware of our internal biases and preconceptions, and limit their negative effects on the relationships we are trying to cultivate, develop, and build.

This is a comprehensive issue that transcends the military and affects all U.S. departments and agencies that support stability operations. Apart from the need to forge relationships based on trust and value, we must be able to develop agile and adaptive thinkers who are able to sort through the kaleidoscope of societal threads to recognize patterns and exploit opportunities as necessary. These individuals must have the ability to analyze who and what is truly important, who must be engaged, and which leaders must be marginalized—as well as when this must be done and to what degree. Above all, these individuals must be able to discern the natural hierarchy of order, to include important social patterns, nodes, and networks, and then draw logical conclusions and predictive patterns from these relationships.

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A fundamental part of this task is identifying and understanding the role of resident networks within a society. The common denominator in any analysis of these networks should center on the question of legitimacy. Does this particular network have a disabling or enabling



impact on legitimacy? Those networks that have a disabling effect, such as vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices and hostile third-nation groups, should be the focus of security efforts to eliminate or mitigate their effects. Those networks that have an enabling effect, such as essential services, businesses, and local/provincial governments, should be supported comprehensively through focused U.S. efforts.

For a government to be legitimate in the eyes of its people, it must be able to provide security, essential services, and the rule of law. One of the mental tools that we found most useful in assessing our progress was the acronym SWEAT–MTS (sewage, water, electricity, agricultural, trash, medical, transportation, and schools). This simple device helped us identify and focus our efforts on fixing, maintaining, and improving these enabling networks. By focusing our efforts, we were able to continually assess these key nodes, constantly improve them, and fix them when necessary. A fair question is: What does one of these enabling networks look like? Take, for instance, an irrigation network: to produce crops, a farmer needs irrigation, but irrigation can only be accomplished through a robust canal network capable of distributing the water from point A to points B, C, and D. To fill the canals, the farmer will need pumps that can divert water and distribute it throughout the extensive canal system. The pumps require electricity to operate. Electricity, in turn, requires generators, which require fuel and maintenance. Moreover, all of this requires the expertise of human capital that needs to be trained to operate the facets of this network properly.

Each individual operational environment requires a subjective analysis, and the tools and requirements to achieve success will most certainly vary. Yet possessing individuals capable of

bringing clarity to the operational environment has universal application, and only those nations that can leverage this human capital will achieve success. Our collective challenge is to harness the vast capacities of the U.S. Government and tap into America's inexhaustible human capital to identify, train, and progressively leverage the adaptable and agile thinkers needed to realize success in the future. This is an enduring task, for true understanding is an endless pursuit.

Unity of Effort in the Interagency Approach

The dynamic, complex, and uncertain operating environments of the 21st century will test the mental agility, adaptability, and cooperative nature of the Nation's civilian and military personnel as never before. It is within this context that our ability to plan, coordinate, assess, and focus our collective national power in an efficient and synchronized manner mitigates the conditions leading to instability. We must always be mindful that regardless of agency affiliation, our mission is the same: to establish the foundations of a lasting peace through the instruments of our national power. We must break down the cultural barriers, myopic viewpoints, and parochial agendas that hinder efforts to build a cohesive and focused whole-of-government team.

This requires a fundamental cultural shift in attitudes toward our interagency efforts. Leadership will be a vital component of this effort. Key stakeholder leaders must promote atmospheres where the spirit of cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork is encouraged, and where the negative effects of suspicion, infighting, and self-interested agendas are eliminated.

This collaborative spirit along with operational *lessons learned* and *best practices* must

be comprehensively and robustly infused into our collective and individual educational and training models. To accomplish this daunting task requires honest and objective assessments of internal capabilities, limitations, and redundancies, and a clear delineation of the roles and responsibilities for each organization. Only by achieving a truly united effort can we hope to eliminate the disparate and redundant efforts that hinder the accomplishment of our collective mission and foster a comprehensive approach forged from unity of effort and purpose.

Our operational role will be to mentor, assist, and enable our host nation partners to make the best decisions possible for their country as well as ours. To do so, we must have the humility to give deference and respect to the knowledge and customs of our indigenous partners—all the while remembering that American solutions to problems will likely not always be the correct answer. Conversely, we must realize that purely indigenous solutions may be flawed as well. The challenge will be to arrive at solutions based on consensus, feasibility, and overall effect. When weighing possible courses of action, we must ask ourselves: *What is good for the society as a whole?* Merely implementing

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a solution that is good for one particular segment of the population runs the risk of alienating and marginalizing other segments, thus creating drivers of instability as a result. It is a leader's job to weigh the possible secondary and tertiary effects and implement a solution

for the greater good. That is precisely why it is so important that we have the personnel who can assist our decisionmakers in understanding the operational environment.

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We must be cognizant of the fact that partnerships are *defined* by the value of mutual benefit and *developed* by the interpersonal skills that seek trust, mutual understanding, and respect. This maxim applies equally to our interagency relationships, as well as to our external relationships and partnerships with nongovernmental organizations, intergovernmental agencies, multinational allies, and indigenous partners. This outward-looking task is all the more daunting when viewed through the prism of Western preconceptions and agency-centric agendas. Predeployment training and education, as well as operational coordination and intelligence-sharing, can help alleviate some of the adverse effects of our own prejudices. However, they will never be enough. Regardless of how brilliant we may think we are, we can never replicate the personal experience and cultural expertise of those who live in a particular society. That is why every effort should be made to build the partnerships and relationships necessary for us to lift the cultural veil and enable our efforts.

The dynamic power of relationship-building was impressed upon us while we were in Iraq. With the implementation of the Security Agreement, American forces were precluded from conducting unilateral operations. The stipulations of the Security Agreement

mandated that we conduct bilateral partnered operations with the Iraqi Security Forces. The quandary that we faced was how we were to achieve effects on the ground if we were unable to unilaterally affect the outcome. Iraq was a sovereign country, with a sovereign military, that no longer needed to heed our advice or requests. This dilemma was further complicated when American forces were required to move out of the cities on June 30, 2009. How could we accomplish our mission when we were not even alongside our Iraqi partners? The only viable solution was to fully engage our partners and build the relationships that enabled us to earn their trust. Through this trust, we had an effective mentoring and coaching partnership. The forcing mechanism of the Security Agreement compelled us to build the types of relationship that we should have established much earlier, yet had not. By building relationships based on respect and defined by mutual benefit, we were able to get the Iraqi Security Forces to achieve the effects called for.

The true power of relationships was further reinforced for us through the special bond that we forged with one of the provincial governors in our area of operations. This firebrand governor had been an outspoken Sunni opponent of the American “occupiers,” as well as the Kurdish presence within Arab lands. Indeed, most saw his position as intractable, and engagement seemed pointless. Although we had to work through these concerns, by constantly developing an interpersonal relationship, we were able to ultimately *earn* his trust. By clearly laying out how our efforts could benefit the governor politically and improve the lives of the people at the same time, we were able to break through his suspicions and establish a relationship built on *value* and *vested interest*.

This relationship was also able to diffuse drivers of instability (for example, Arab-Kurd tensions along disputed internal boundaries separating Iraq and the Kurdish regional government) and achieve at least some temporary effects that benefited all.

The true lesson of this particular story is that effective relationships are not developed by happenstance. They are earned. They require people with the interpersonal skills to connect with others, overcome possible hostilities and misconceptions, and earn the other parties' trust. Relationships are defined by the value they add to each party. The strongest relationships are ones in which each party equally benefits (that is, success for one constitutes success for the other). Every effort should be made to develop and mature the interpersonal skills our personnel need to build relationships and forge partnerships. Our personnel should be armed with the negotiation and dispute resolution skills required to reach compromise and overcome impasses.¹² Relationship-building is not a task that comes naturally to the military, but it is one that we must collectively master in the future if we hope to be successful.

An important component of that effort extends back to strengthening our relationships with our joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) partners. By building these relationships based on trust and value, we can focus collective capabilities in a comprehensive and synchronized manner. These relationships need to be habitual and enduring, rather than established in-theater when the stakes are for real. This particular revelation occurred prior to our deployment. Despite predeployment training meetings with key agencies and departments, we still felt inadequately prepared in terms of training and

resources on what was necessary for a practitioner to build Iraqi governance and its economy. The bottom line is that we lacked the expertise, experience, and training needed, and that our JIIM partners were not resourced to assist us in the manner required.

With nowhere else to turn, we came to the sobering realization that we were going to have to train and educate ourselves for the mission ahead. After much consideration and exhaustive searches, I came across *Tell Me How This Ends*, Linda Robinson's book about General David Petraeus's efforts in Iraq.¹³ This book served as a roadmap of sorts in formulating our plan for economic recovery in Northern Iraq. We also used the agricultural expertise of the University of Hawaii to aid us in our efforts to revitalize Northern Iraq's agricultural industry. As incredible as it may seem, our efforts, which represented the tip of American strategic efforts, were based on lessons gleaned from a book and an American university. The point is that despite the vast and comprehensive training and educational enablers already resident within our national apparatus, it was still unequipped to help us on the key counterinsurgency tasks and skills required to build governance and stimulate economic development.

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Building Interagency Knowledge and Training Programs

To remedy this problem in the future, it is necessary for the United States to enforce the interdepartmental cultural changes required

by expanding the scope of interagency efforts to establish a more permanent, enduring, and robust education, training, doctrine, materiel, and organizational approach among the various agencies engaging in stability operations. This could be accomplished in various ways, some of which would simply require an expansion of existing efforts. Programs and initiatives such as embedded training opportunities and the expansion of interagency educational opportunities could help to alleviate cultural misconceptions and streamline agendas. Introducing a common language for interagency efforts would help eliminate the confusion associated with the various terminologies unique to each agency. Additionally, we must be able to build our teams prior to deployment by aligning and synchronizing deployment cycles to be mutually supportive. Above all, we must promote the social conditions necessary to develop a truly interactive and collaborative atmosphere among all stakeholders.

To add the necessary order to this process, senior American leaders must have a professional mastery of the projection of national power and a profound understanding of the underpinnings of the society in which they operate. They must be able to identify the issues, decide the effects needed and their correct sequencing, and direct how this must all be accomplished. Additionally, they must be cognizant of the changing character of conflict. Unlike days past, where combat power was massed at a singular decisive point within the operational depth of the battlefield, in a counterinsurgency decisive points manifest throughout society. These leaders must function as the focal points in interagency efforts, establishing climates of collaboration and cooperation by forging the relationships and partnerships required to achieve the desired effects.

A key component to implementing the leaders' vision will reside in subordinates who are astute and adept enough to collaboratively work within the context of an interagency environment. These agile and adaptive subordinates must possess the interpersonal skills required to build consensus and relationships among partners and the critical thinking skills to correctly identify and leverage the vast array of resources and enablers of national power. To accomplish this requires a broad graduate-level understanding of the functions, resources, abilities, and limitations of the various agencies and departments within the U.S. Government.

The creation of an "Interagency University" able to produce individuals with a comprehensive understanding of the application of national power would help to "alleviate bureaucratic, policy and resourcing friction by fostering the conditions necessary for the development, acceptance and application of comprehensive doctrine, language and processes across all United States Governmental Departments and Agencies."¹⁴ Graduates would serve as a synchronizing element and enabling influence for future interagency training, educational, and operational efforts. These agile and adaptive leaders would be able to leverage all the instruments of national power in a precise and effective manner, unencumbered by organizational agendas and bias. This cadre of elite, multifaceted strategic thinkers would serve as a foundation in the Nation's quest to achieve a truly collaborative and cooperative whole-of-government approach to counterinsurgency and stability operations.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of the 21st-century operating environment and the rapidly evolving character of conflict, the United States must establish and maintain a unity of effort to realize

future strategic success. Forging a comprehensive approach to counterinsurgency operations will require the breakdown of cultural barriers, establishment of innovative training and educational paradigms, promotion of atmospheres of collaboration and cooperation, and establishment of relationships and partnerships based on trust and value. This will only be realized by sweeping changes to how U.S. departments and agencies plan, train, organize, educate, and develop the next generation of leaders.

Perhaps the most essential area of attention is leadership development. The focus of these programs is to build agile and adaptive leaders who are not only culturally astute with indigenous populations, but also astute, knowledgeable, and effective when operating among various agencies and departments within the government. A key component of this effort will be how we collectively address this challenge. A good place to start would be in the chartering of an Interagency University devoted to producing the strategic leaders versed in the comprehensive application of national power. These individuals would serve as the foundation for future interagency efforts.

The future lies undiscovered. It is up to us to help shape and define it. This task will require hard work, sacrifice of personal and organizational agendas, and, above all, our collective focus. The challenges confronting us are varied and complex, but together we can successfully forge a comprehensive approach to counterinsurgency operations in the 21st century. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ George W. Casey, Jr., “The Army of the 21st Century,” *Army Magazine*, October 2009.

² Field Manual 3–07, *Stability Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, October 2008), 12–13.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ Jarret M. Brachman, “High-Tech Terror: Al-Qaeda’s Use of New Technology,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2006).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision* (New York: UN, 2009); UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision* (New York: UN, 2009).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ Population theory postulated by British political economist Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), in which the world’s population outpaces its finite capacity to secure natural resources leading to catastrophic effects. See Robert Kunzig, “Population 7 Billion,” *National Geographic*, January 2011.

⁹ Field Manual 3–0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, February 2008), 1–13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ *The United States Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Field Manual 3–24.2, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, April 2009), chapter 2.

¹² See Roger Fisher, William L. Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2^d ed. (New York: Penguin, 1991).

¹³ Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

¹⁴ Stefan J. Banach, "School of Advanced Interagency Studies (SAIS)," white paper, School of Advanced Military Studies, May 2010.